Ivo Brešan

Nothing Sacred

Ništa Sveto

Presented by: Andrea Milanko

Published in 2008, a two-part novel *Ništa sveto* depicts a hero Nenad Pralina from his birth in the 1950s to 2000s, the aftermath of Croatia's war of independence and its transition from a socialist to capitalist society. Apart from Pralina's life and participation in the formation of the newly founded European state, the plot also encompasses the Croatian emigrant community in Canada and Germany and their influence on the mother country. Recent historical events are depicted with a humorous or ironic twist, thus contesting the official narrative supported by the ruling party and the regime newspapers. The novel takes up economic crisis, corruption, terrorist organizations and the transformation of the banking system, describing their unspoken background as warlords dividing the spoils of war among themselves. Although all characters are fictional, they are involved in events reminiscent of Croatia's recent criminal, political and historical circumstances.

The story revolves around an antihero Nenad Pralina, an orphan of unknown origin, escaping the orphanage, only to end up with a group of petty criminals and later in the care of a prostitute. His story is told by Pralina himself, mostly in first-person, except for the Prologue. What makes this novel a typical picaresque is the first-person narration in a confessional mode, the large space the protagonist is moving around (from Europe to Canada), episodic and linear exposition and the protagonist's fixed character immune to change, as well as his murky origin and a flare for picaresque novels (at some point he read Dickens' novels).

The reason why a small criminal like Nenad Pralina is swept up in larger historically important events is his uncanny resemblance to a terrorist Krešimir Brakus, a nationalist hero of the underground emigration community whose main goal was the independence of Croatia from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. When Brakus dies in one of his risky assignments, people who knew him and had also met with Pralina decide to use the latter to keep the myth of the terrorist Brakus alive. Pralina is Brakus' double because they were twin brothers separated at birth by mistake. Adopting his new identity, Pralina is doing nothing but faithfully following the script of a picaro, i.e. acting and pretending according to the circumstances in order to save his life and/or improve his social status.

Pralina's insight foreshadows the upcoming events, “if you happen to wander into politics, even if unwittingly, as I'm about to do, you cannot escape politics mishandling you“ (p. 74). Since his place in the world is uncertain from the beginning, all his endeavours are aimed at finding a solid ground, not in the sense of family life, but in terms of financial stability and peaceful everyday existence. However, this is proved to be impossible: on the final pages, we observe Pralina handling doctors and nurses in a mental institution, “playing different roles for doctors, nurses, and patients, shifting from one role into the other, depending on the play now playing“ (p. 383). His individual acting skills have been outsmarted by a corrupt system, which has used him as a political scapegoat.

What makes this particular Brešan's novel provocative is the author's willingness to portray major war events such as Operation Flash (an offensive undertaken from 1-3 May 1995 in Croatia in order to regain possession of a territory held by the rebelled local Serbs) and Operation Storm (a decisive battle ending the war) with a fictive, humorous twist. Brešan's hero Pralina does not discuss the political repercussions of these military operations, but takes them as yet another opportunity to make his protagonist shine as a picaro, i.e. fooling all the characters in order to be regarded as a hero. Other Brešan's instances of going against the grain are episodes in the Hague Penitentiary Institution and at the court for fraud in banking. Both episodes defy expectations in that Pralina is depicted working behind the scenes, cooperating with criminals he publicly and adamantly denounces.

Pralina's narration is neutral and detached, without emotions one would expect his life circumstances or events that have befallen him would instigate. This stylistic neutrality is purposeful in that it highlights the discrepancy between Croatia's recent history of economic and moral collapse and the meaning the dominant ideology has ascribed to, i.e. the love of the fatherland. Since Pralina holds nothing sacred, he is in a perfect position not to be misled by his sentiments, nor to let himself be persuaded by those who would play on his feelings. Thus, by resisting the manipulation of others, he is able to signal to the reader the means by which manipulation is created.

Ivo Brešan and his son Vinko were at the forefront of dismantling Croatian nationalistic myths through popular culture during the 1990s through film comedies such as *How the War Started on My Island* (1996, dir. Vinko Brešan, screenplay by Ivo and Vinko Bresan) and *Marsal Tito's Spirit* (1999, dir. Vinko Brešan, screenplay by Ivo and Vinko Brešan). Ivo Brešan also appealed to the wider audience with his novels, which replaced the intellectual elitism of modernist discourse with a more palatable narration consisting of twists and turns, as well as more simplified exposition. He remained faithful to a critique of every ideology and dictatorship, starting from his highly successful play *A Performance of Hamlet in the Village of Mrduša Donja* (1971).

LANGUAGE: Croatian / Hrvatski

CENSORSHIP STATUS: